

WHAT BUSINESS CAN DO FOR THE BLACK COMMUNITY

Remarks of
WILLIAM A. MERCER

at the

NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON BLACK POWER
July 20-23, 1967
Newark, New Jersey

I have been given the highly challenging task of listing some of the things business can do for the black community. At the outset I want it clearly understood that while I am fervently in favor of economic power for black people to the extent that I would love to see a black owned General Motors, I am realistic regarding the high improbability of this ever occurring in the United States.

I am sure many of you feel that our capitalistic system is decadent and spearheading the extinction of our present society. I have gotten the feeling from attendance thus far that likewise, many of you will equate what I say as conservative and unacceptable. I also have the notion that to some, anything less than total revolution--actual overthrow of our white business system and indeed our whole society, is the only solution to gaining economic justice and freedom in a free enterprise society. This is the most diverse black group ever assembled and I expect such viewpoints.

Nevertheless, I happen to believe that capitalism is a pretty good thing. It has given us the most affluent society the world has ever known. The big hangup is that up to now the US has not included black people. I say that we make the great attempt, now, along with all the other efforts to achieve black power to get our just share--a piece of the action so far denied, and then if rebuffed, only then, join in the overthrow of our present capitalistic system.

Before we can talk of discarding this capitalistic system and all its abuses however, I think we have to know how it works. Never having been a part of this system other than little-rewarded producers, I say we must learn about capitalism, manage capitalism, and indeed, in some communities like Newark where black people are in the majority, we should even move to control free enterprise.

To control capitalism we must first have a much better concept and understanding of ourselves and our total society. I don't want to get off into that trick bag which is an even bigger and more important task. Before I take off on my subject however, I would like to undergird this talk with an overview of the plight of our cities which is at the heart of the problem.

White Americans delude themselves into thinking the suburban life of a country squire on a green, half-acre estate is a commonly held dream castle most men aspire to make a reality. The fact of the matter is that they and we are urban creatures and more and more are flocking to the cities. Over 70% of our total population now resides in these tinderboxes replete with less than tender problems.

The magnitude of these problems has been heavily documented. Air pollution, Ghetto housing and disappearing jobs for the unskilled. Choked roads getting into and out of our cities.

High and ever-rising crime rates now amounting to \$2,450.00 as the average annual cost to keep a person in jail. Inadequate schools. Insufficient water supply. White middle incomers fleeing to suburbia and financially boycotting urban centers, yet retaining their jobs in the cities. Gnawing, festering poverty aggravated by neglect and discrimination which abets the creeping destruction which has begun to speed up.

Of course the number one problem is racism. Whites are continuing to flee the cities and leaving them blacker and blacker. Over 200,000

people, more than half of Newark's population is Negro and Puerto Rican. We have the highest percentage of black people above the Mason-Dixon Line. The enigma and shame is that in this richest society ever, this nation endures its greatest amount of resegregation, poverty and misery. These conditions have stamped abject hopelessness into black people locked in city ghettos.

Some people think the problems of the city are so monumental to overcome that we should consign our complex urban centers to the scrap heap. They say we should start from scratch and build totally new cities. At least 12 such attempts are currently contemplated. The General Electric Company plans to erect a brand new, 200,000 people city. A new community for 110,000 residents is going up in the corridor between Baltimore and Washington. These are but two of the examples. I have no quarrel with brand new communities as partial answers to urban sprawl and megalopolis. This is needed. However, the tremendous siphoning off of energy, talent and skills needed to fashion new cities does not bode well for this desperately needed expertise which I feel could be better utilized to redevelop, reclaim and solve the crucial problems of our old cities.

Mayor John Lindsay said 50 billion dollars is needed to save and make New York into the kind of fun city he desires. Mayor Jerome Cavanaugh of Detroit places the renewal and resurrection tab for the Motor City at 25 billion. Before last week's self-fulfilling death-wish projected Newark on the front pages and TV screens all over the world, Mayor Hugh J. Addonizio calculated that 10 billion might do the job for Newark.

Jobs, education and housing are the biggest headaches. The Negro unemployment rate 35 years ago at the depths of the Depression in 1931

was roughly equal to that of whites. Today, it has doubled. Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz several months ago in his manpower report to President Johnson, stated the situation for the Negro is expected to grow even worse by 1980. He reported Negro unemployment nationally at approximately eight per cent, 2.4 times the white rate.

Contrary to popular belief, while the Negro is getting more education, the disparity between his income and white income is actually widening. A Negro college graduate is expected to earn in his lifetime the comparable earnings of a white man with an eighth grade education. The difference several years ago was around 56% of white income. Today, Negroes earn only 51-52% of the wages received by whites.

Unemployed Negro youth in economically impacted areas like Newark, Camden, Trenton, and Atlantic City, New Jersey currently averages in the neighborhood of 30%.

Money appropriated for alleviation comes in for heavy criticism. Yet antipoverty funds, demonstration city allocations when they are doled out and the 10-year, annual 10-billion dollar "Freedom Budget" of the A. Philip Randolph Institute endorsed by over 200 prominent Americans--altogether, roughly approximates half the 22 billion dollar moon program. We spend more on Vietnam in a month than we spend on saving our people and our cities in a year.

Business must help the black community get the same kind of billions to correct these problems. It was no joking matter to over 20,000,000 black people when Congress day before yesterday killed the Anti-Rat Bill which would literally save the lives of many babies. Far, far more than the \$40,000,000 requested is spent to safeguard cattle and livestock.

We hear business people and now even black people condemn government grants. I would like a tightening on anti-poverty funds so they do a

better job in reaching hard-core poor but we must not forget that oil depletion allowances, tax incentives and abatements, guaranteed interest for risk-venture capital are also forms of government grants. Business can help to creatively get money from Father Federal. My organization the Business and Industrial Coordinating Council has never received one penny of anti-poverty money from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) yet we have obtained over a million dollars from Washington. Local business can contribute and private foundations can be solicited for the big sums desperately needed to solve the pressing problems of our cities.

One of the problems seems to be one of proper communication. A lot of words come through but are we really communicating? It reminds me of a story. In Southern towns there are statues of General William Tecumseh Sherman astride a great horse as a Civil War reminder of his March-to-the-Sea. Every week this farmer brought his son to town to view this gigantic statue. This particular Saturday he brought Junior to see the man on a horse for the last time because they were moving to another state. Over the years the boy had grown fond of the town-square attraction and looking at it for the final time he turned to his father with tears in his eyes and said, "Dad, since we won't be coming here anymore will you please tell me who is that sitting on Sherman?" We see but do we perceive? This is somewhat the plight of our cities. Will white people act to avoid the consequences? Will they get horse sense and really communicate with the growing number of black residents now inhabiting our cities? Will they resolve the root causes to avert the recurrence of what has happened here in Newark, Watts, Cleveland, Rochester, Chicago and so many other cities?

Dick Gregory in keynoting this Conference put it very bluntly.

"Black people may not have the capacity to build up our cities but they certainly have the power to burn them down".

I think the business sector must be quickly awakened to the creative use of black power which can be shared justly with the total community or continue to witness what happens when riot power prevails. There is no "fire next time" the burning is here and now. White people have got to address the problems of all ghettos in this country right now. Tomorrow is too late. Now how?

First of all business must help get white people to accept the grievances of the black community as just. Along with this acceptance there must be a resolve to quickly do something about it or face again and again the ugly but real fact that enraged people will tear down the total community. It is my considered opinion that in order for business to truly help the unreached black community, several other things have to happen. Of prime importance is a climate of "for real" sincerity and believability has to be so strongly exhibited it will effectively combat the hopelessness and distrust that pervades our black ghettos.

The phenomenon of Negroes being "discovered" by 90% of our population is a communications event of recent origin that has to be rapidly accelerated. Ralph Ellison's award-winning book "invisible Man" was written in 1950. Perhaps for the first time a literary effort documented the extent to which black Americans were hidden. A foreigner visiting our country then would have been hard-put to believe Negroes constituted ten percent of our population because they were "invisible" in newspapers, on television and radio.

Business must join hands with Negro leaders to start the aggressive out-reach necessary for really effective communication. This might take the form of racial inventory where an assessment is made of the areas in

which job shortages or skilled people are needed and then to look for qualified black people for those spots.

A simple "gimmick" to accomplish this would be for the board of directors of your chamber of commerce to each ask 10 black people--their maid, waiter, mailman, etc., to list by numerical ranking those whom they believe to be the ten most influential Negroes in town. Following up on this, I think a kind of Public Service or Civic Service Bank not too far removed from the Urban League's Skills Bank, ought to be established. White people will be surprised at the persons black people truly consider their real leaders. There are a number of Negroes who could assume leadership roles now but do not have the entrée and leverage necessary for meaningful contact with the white community. Financial and personal assistance should be extended to get them involved, particularly if their names turn up on this Civic Service Bank.

I mean paid memberships, sort of like scholarships, in civic and service clubs plus financial sponsorship in professional and other associations. And I don't want business forgetting the "soul brother." Our emerging black middle class sometimes think they are the only ones who can "relate to mainstream white Americans. I'd like to go back to Dick Gregory again who movingly told us about the 16-year old black youngster in Plainfield, New Jersey, who had no difficulty whatsoever in "telling" it like it is" to millions of Americans on TV.

Dialogue has to be established with the total community perhaps best spearheaded by business. To do this white America has to discover how black Americans really live. This discovery cannot be done by listening to white experts on black people or Negroes selected by the white power structure who say and reinforce what white people in power want to hear. Suburbanites must be brought into the ghetto to get first-hand looks.

You must get business to help explode racial myths and not explode our cities. This only leads to black death.

Like most of you I've been over the poverty route. Relief, not enough food, cold water flats--the whole bit. Fifteen of those hard, impoverished years were spent on Springfield Avenue, the street worst hit by Newark's riot. I was out every night during the five-day holocaust and literally sneaked in and out of Springfield Avenue where my mother still lives. I could not get her to leave her "home" even though it is an apartment in a building she does not own. She told me she saw the national guardsman assigned to watch the building shoot up the first floor furniture store owned by a Negro. This may be hard to believe but I heard over 20 first-hand accounts from reputable black businessmen who claim and many are going to bring suit, that their stores were shot up by the N. J. State Police, N. J. National Guard and Newark Police simply because protective signs saying "Negro Owned" and "Soul Brother" had prevented them from being damaged or looted. This is the kind of vindictive racism business can help eliminate.

Whether businessmen believe it or not they simply must accept the fact that police all over this nation do not treat blackmen fairly. I know precious few Negroes over 30 who have not had confrontations with police. On five occasions during last week's revolt I was stopped so much it took me two hours to negotiate the four miles between Springfield Avenue and my home. I never saw one mention in all the extensive news coverage that there were white looters. I saw dozens of people black and white, young and old pouring out of the smashed windows of Sears Department Store and several observing policemen did not lift a finger. Conversely, a little black youngster no more than eleven with a few trinkets in his arms was gunned down by two policemen.

A front page report of the rioting at Newark's Fourth Precinct on the first day July 12th in the Newark Evening News bylined by David C. Berliner, stated "Police, divided into four squads of about 10 helmeted patrolmen each, marched into the street, asking groups to disperse and ducking stones falling from the darkened buildings." Nothing could be farther from the truth. Millions witnessed on television, helmeted cops in direct contradiction to Inspector Melchior's order to stay inside the precinct, charge out of the stationhouse and indiscriminately bludgeon everyone in sight including newsmen and cameramen.

It is not my role to drag up the race question or give my views on communism, democracy, socialism or black nationalism, but I must urge all of you to impress on the entire white community that police mistreatment exists.

Several years ago the Newark Junior Chamber of Commerce subsidized two Newark policemen and paid their full membership expenses for a year. In three years one of these policemen became President of the Chapter. This was a successful experiment. Soon, blue collar workers, teachers, Negroes and policemen and firemen were added to Jaycee ranks. This is the kind of "first" the business community can also undertake to get black people included in other parts of our society and help demonstrate the kind of believability and concern I mentioned before.

A Negro hired at the middle-management level said his boss asked him to ask me what groups and clubs he should join? I suggested that he ask this boss, "What groups did he belong to?"

Last year I attended the 18th annual, all-day Business Conference sponsored by Rutgers our state university and the North Jersey Sales Executives Club. In attendance were 1100 businessmen from three states. I didn't see another Negro. I might add that 14 showed up last month.

Some might call this 1300 per cent rise progress but it is tokenism that will be increased vastly when next year's Conference rolls around.

Former Governor Meyner, addressing a Greater Newark Chamber of Commerce luncheon of 800 here last year commented that from the make-up of the audience, a stranger certainly wouldn't know that half of Newark's population was non-white. I think you see the point I'm trying to make. Business must help make black people become visible.

Those citing the difficulty in reaching the disadvantaged community ought to look no further than the Sabin Sundays, when literally thousands of residents reported for vaccinations against polio. Over 90% of our senior citizens registered for Medicare. Outreach success has also been obtained in aggressive voter registration efforts.

Another area of concern is the wide-spread belief that ghettos have no leadership. Newark's Central Ward where the rioting occurred last week is New Jersey's largest ghetto. In a four block area which includes the Douglas-Harrison Apartments which were built over 30 years ago by Prudential Insurance Company there lives a Superior Court Judge, a State Assemblyman, four doctors, two housing project managers, a Newark Councilman-at-large, the most popular Negro taver owner in the City, five grass roots poverty leaders, a New York based advertising executive and a number of teachers and other professionals. I am sure that if a door to door canvass were made, many more people of this calibre could be located. I merely drove by, stopped the car for a few minutes and jotted down the names of Negroes I knew who lived within the four blocks. What I am saying is that with over 200,000 Negroes in Newark, there is valuable talent here virtually untapped. This talent also lives in your communities. It is wasting away when it could so easily be harnessed to help build bigger businesses and help us all build better cities.

Business cannot continue its palliative approach to the problem. Real concern must be demonstrated. Here in Newark where all over the nation we were called sophisticated and hip because we came up with the first business/community manpower council in my own BICC; the first community action program to submit proposals to CEO; the first Neighborhood Youth Corps; plus other firsts . . . still lightning struck.

Business can no longer stand on the sidelines and become peripherally involved. As I have already stated, sophistication without concern and believability will not save our cities. Let me give you a current example. Last week the Greater Newark Chamber of Commerce elected its 1967-68, 31-member Board of Directors. In a city more than half black the Chamber has still to elect a Negro director. Another example: The Chamber also puts out a weekly bulletin to its 1200 members in which it lists a calendar of meetings and events. The current bulletin calls our sessions the National Conference on Empowerment. Even the host hotels do not use the words Black Power. Business should be made aware that the term Black Power may have been anathema to me and even a large number of black people last year when it was reborn by Stokely Carmichael but today it has overwhelming acceptance in the black community. Trained in communications, I was against the phrase simply because I felt anything you have to constantly explain is hard to communicate. We now have had a year in which Black Power has been highly publicized. In that same period, the word black has gained increased acceptance, while the word Negro has lost some of its lustre. I could go on at length and indicate on page after page where business can aid the black community, but in broad strokes I just want to point out a few other areas.

*Business must certainly become more involved in uplift efforts, anti-poverty and otherwise, particularly in manpower training akin to the BICC.

*Business must assume the role of helper to create a black entrepreneurial class by financing, training and including Negroes in managerial areas within the world of work. Federally backed, small business investment corporations; an Interracial Council on Business Opportunity and/or a Small Business Development Center with a realistic loan program utilizing human collateral; public and private cooperatives, condominiums, plus a whole host of other aid programs can be sponsored by business.

*Business must take a heavier role in the educational system which is criminally undereducating our children. After all, schools turn out the end-product that business hires. In its own self-interest, business must help improve the educational product.

*Business must stop screening out people at entry level positions by the use of biased tests and unrealistic job requirements.

*Business should help open up the private housing market. Open housing is certainly on the way. Companies can aid their black personnel find housing where they desire to live with the help of fair, real estate brokers. This would resolve one of the major ghetto problems. Surely if the black and other minorities, only 11% of our total population were dispersed to achieve an Open Society, many of our racial problems would vanish. In the North and South, among black and white--even in this room, integration seems to be declining. Integration has never been fashionable, but I strongly urge business put its muscle behind togetherness before separatism takes over and leads this nation to destruction.

*Business, especially in the communications industry must be more truthful and fair in reporting crime. News coverage in this country regarding black people is horrendous. I am sure some of you know the name of the off-duty fire captain who was killed last week in the Newark riots. I am equally sure that not one of you can give me the name of the innocent black mother of 11 children who was killed in her apartment. The disproportionate coverage was fantastic. I'll never get over the fact that an unknown, off-duty policeman J. D. Tippit was killed when President Kennedy was assassinated and his widow received \$1,000,000 in contributions. When nationally known civil rights leader Medgar Evers was murdered, donations, mostly from Negroes, were less than one-tenth the amount given the Tippit family. Unequal news treatment leads to unequal compassion. This whole area of uplifting the Negro image to impart dignity must be joined in by businessmen. Again, there has to be fairness and concern.

There is another selfish motive for business to aid the black community.

Business and commerce can lessen the costly search for manpower in Europe, Asia, and South America. It need look no further than the black community to ease the skills shortage and "brain drain." Harry Emerson Foedick said, "Democracy is based upon the conviction that there are

extraordinary possibilities in ordinary people." I am talking about black people, many of whom are far from ordinary but who have not had opportunity. The business community can help itself and our nation by digging in and beginning to mine this most precious resource, the untapped black gold inherent in black people.

Thank you!

Are there any questions?

W. A. Mercer

7-22-67